The Atonement of Jesus Christ: A Two-Part Study

Part One: The Nature of the Atonement

Abstract

This is the first part of a two-part study examining the doctrine of the atonement, often called 'Limited Atonement' or 'Definite Atonement,' within the framework of Reformed theology. Part One focuses on the necessity and nature of Christ's atoning work. Drawing primarily on Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and other key biblical passages, this study explores what Jesus Christ accomplished through His suffering and death. The study demonstrates that Christ's work was substitutionary, reconciling, propitiatory, and redemptive in character. Understanding what Jesus achieved provides the foundation for Reformed theology's claim that the atonement is definite and effective, securing complete salvation for God's elect people. This truth should inspire deeper love for God and greater assurance in the hearts of believers.

Introduction

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah is often called the prophet of the atonement, and Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12 provides a compelling reason for this designation. As we continue our Sunday school studies on the Doctrines of Grace, this morning's subject is the doctrine of Limited Atonement. As we examine this wonderful subject from God's holy Word, we should recognize that what came before today's topic and what will follow in upcoming weeks are closely linked. We are not examining the Savior's work in isolation from the other truths discussed in this class. As we have seen in previous weeks, the doctrines we are studying all fall under our great God's sovereign grace, mercy, and love.

We have discussed man's sinful condition, which resulted from Adam, the first man, rebelling against God. Scripture clearly states that all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God, as Romans 3:23 teaches. What is the ultimate result of sin, as the Apostle Paul teaches us in Ephesians 2:1? Death! Spiritual death! The passage declares, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.' In the language of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, 'The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?' This is found in Jeremiah 17:9. Throughout God's word, it is clear that Total Depravity, represented by the 'T' in our TULIP acronym, describes the condition of all mankind. In this condition, we discussed that mankind, in and of itself, has no hope.

Yet within God's eternal plan, His love and grace, He chose a large number of people from every tribe, language, and nation to receive eternal life and be united with Jesus Christ. We said this was entirely God's doing, not dependent on any conditions or on predicting a person's faith. In Ephesians again, this time in chapter 1, verses 3 through 5, we read, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In Love, he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.'

As we explore the doctrine of Atonement, we must understand that the same sovereign grace and love that, in the language of the Apostle Paul, predestined the Elect to eternal life is also the source that sent the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to suffer and die on behalf of sinners like us. Those chosen by the Father in election and given to the Son had to be redeemed from their sins. That is what limited atonement, or perhaps definite atonement, means.

I want to start with a question. The question is: When our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross, did he pay for the sins of the entire human race, or only for the sins of those he knew would ultimately be saved? Or to put it another way, did our Savior die to make people redeemable, or to redeem specifically those appointed to salvation?

To answer this question about the scope and purpose of the atonement, it is helpful first to examine its necessity and what the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ entails. In fact, Scripture's strongest argument for the doctrine of Limited Atonement is the work of the Lord Jesus' atonement. When we observe what Jesus achieved and the benefits His work provided to sinners, we understand why we say He paid for the sins of the Elect of God.

The order in which we will study this subject, guided by Scripture, is as follows: First, the Necessity of the Atonement. Second, the Nature of the Atonement. Third, the Extent of the Atonement, which will address the 'limited' term in the title 'Limited Atonement.' Finally, the Effects of the Atonement.

The Necessity of the Atonement

I want to begin with a definition borrowed from Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology. It is broad and straightforward. He writes: 'The atonement is Christ's work in his life and death to earn our salvation.' When we think of the atonement, we often focus only on our Savior's suffering and death on the cross. That is correct, but I prefer this simple definition because it includes the benefits of that work. In other words, our Savior secured our salvation for us! What a wonderful truth!

The Atonement achieved a particular purpose, which is essential to recognize because it shapes its scope. Why did our Lord Jesus need to go through all that he did? Why was it necessary for Him to suffer and die, even though He Himself was without any sin? Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, who was raised from the dead and was walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He asked, 'Was it unnecessary that Christ suffer these things and enter into his glory?' This is recorded in Luke 24:26. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed in Matthew 26: 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.' But it was not possible. He had to face the horrible pain and suffering he was about to endure.

Second Peter tells us that God did not spare the angels when they sinned but cast them into hell. Yet for man, God did not do that. In Isaiah 53:10, the Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ, 'makes an offering for guilt.' Why was the atonement necessary? Because Adam rebelled against His maker. He rebelled against a just and holy God. If God were to be righteous and still save people from their guilt due to sin, someone had to pay the penalty because of the justice of a Holy God.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church in chapter 3:26: 'It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' The book of Hebrews repeatedly explains why it was necessary for our Lord Jesus to come into the world, suffer, and die for us. Hebrews 2:14-18 states, 'Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore, he had to be made

like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.'

In all of our Savior's work, which emphasizes the necessity of the Atonement, we must recognize that it was an act of obedience. As John 6:38 states, 'I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me.' Romans 5:19 declares: 'For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.'

So, the atonement was necessary because sinners are guilty, and God is a holy and righteous God. The Lord Jesus Christ gave Himself in obedience to the Father's will, 'making an offering for guilt' as Isaiah describes. Wasn't a believer's election to eternal life enough? Election appointed countless people to everlasting life, yet Christ still had to atone for sins and redeem His people.

The Nature and the Character of the Atonement

In the book of Isaiah, the Servant of the Lord accomplished great things for those He gave Himself for. This leads us to several important biblical truths about the nature of the Atonement, what it was and what it accomplished, or more precisely, what Jesus did for His people. We will examine four needs fulfilled by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, as depicted in Isaiah's portrayal of the Servant. These truths form the heart of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They should inspire us to a deeper love for God and a stronger desire to serve Him. Understanding the nature of the Atonement requires grasping these essential components of our Lord Jesus Christ's work.

Substitution

The first great need that Jesus met was substitution. Reading Isaiah 53:4-6, we notice the prophet's language: 'He has borne our griefs,' 'carried our sorrows,' 'pierced for our transgressions,' 'crushed for our iniquities,' and 'with his wounds we are healed.' The benefits the recipient receives from the servant's substitution are many.

The concept of substitution is illustrated in the Old Testament sacrificial system. A clear example is found in Leviticus 17:11, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life

that makes atonement.' Here, God shows that the sacrificial animal, in its death, substitutes for the offeror's death and makes atonement for his sin.

In the Old Testament, many sacrifices required the offeror to lay his hands on the animal before sacrificing it. A transaction was taking place. God, of course, was preparing His people for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The guilt of the person offering the sacrifice was transferred to the offering itself. The offering was the substitute that bore the punishment for sin. How perfectly that describes our Savior!

The Apostle Paul, writing to the believers at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 5:21, said: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Jerry Bridges and another author, Bob Bevington, have an excellent book called 'The Great Exchange.' I love that title. The title comes from this passage in 2 Corinthians. How incredibly blessed God's people are! Jesus became sin, and in Him, by being united with Him, we gain righteousness! What a glorious transaction! What a wonderful exchange! All because of the incredible depth of God's grace and love!

Jerry Bridges writes about this passage in 2 Corinthians 5:21: 'It would not be an understatement to view this verse, properly understood, as the single key verse of the entire Bible. God made Jesus Christ to be sin; that is, God took the initiative to make the great miracle of substitution happen, as Paul pointed out when he said, ‘All this is from God.'

Dear Christian reader, what a wonderful Savior we have! Many truths in Scripture bring peace and comfort to the believer's heart. This one certainly ranks high on the list! The Lord Jesus' substitutionary work is the core of the good news of salvation, and the Apostles repeatedly emphasized it. First Peter 3:18 declares: 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.' We could, of course, examine dozens of Scripture references.

While we will discuss 'limited atonement' in detail in part two of our study, we should recognize from this great truth of substitution that the atonement was definite and intended for God's people. In other words, our Savior endured suffering and death as our substitute. Did he also suffer and die as a substitute to pay the penalty for sin for those who will ultimately be eternally punished for their sin?

Reconciliation

The next great need that the work of our Lord Jesus addressed for all those he became a substitute for is reconciliation. In his book Redemption Accomplished and Applied, John Murray writes, 'Reconciliation places the focus on our alienation from God and the divine method of restoring us to favor.' Again, Isaiah 53:5 declares, 'Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.' Those for whom the Savior atoned for their sins are at peace with God. They have been reconciled through the work of the Servant.

The apostle Paul rejoiced in this great truth. Romans 5:11-12 states, 'For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.'

Our deep need for reconciliation reveals that mankind is separated and alienated from God. As Isaiah later says in chapter 59:2, 'Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.' A commentator notes that the word for separation used by Isaiah appears only once in the Old Testament, in Genesis 1:6, which states, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'

How awful it is that mankind, apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, is separated, just as the waters above and below were divided at creation! Along with serving as a substitute for the punishment of sin, our Savior's work on the cross brings us into a peaceful, reconciled relationship with God! The separation is broken!

Colossians 1:19-20 declares, 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.' Ephesians 2:15-16 adds, 'By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.'

The work of Christ on behalf of His people reconciles us to God and God to us! In the words of the great hymn, we often sing, 'Hallelujah, What a Savior!'

Propitiation

Along with our redeemer's work as a substitute and in the work of reconciliation, the next important topic to discuss is a word we don't hear or use very often, yet it is a key biblical term for the atonement. The word is Propitiation. It is rarely used in the New Testament but appears frequently in the Old Testament. Propitiation specifically addresses the removal of God's wrath.

In the context of atonement, the term 'propitiation' means 'satisfaction' or 'appeasement.' In Scripture, propitiation refers to calming God's anger against sin, which His justice demands because Christ died for sinners. In Isaiah 53, the servant of God took away God's wrath because 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' God's wrath has been satisfied because of the work of the Lord.

Propitiation is beautifully pictured in the Old Testament Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was a slab of solid gold, measuring 4 feet long and 2 feet wide. It covered the Ark of the Covenant. Do you remember what was inside the Ark? The tablets of God's law. The Law reveals what is in us: sin. The Mercy Seat covers our sins! What a powerful illustration of the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ!

When the priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifices on the altar, the Scriptures often say that they provided a covering for sin. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is revealed as our faithful high priest. He covers his people's sins, doing what the Old Testament priests could only symbolize. First John 2:2 says that the Lord Jesus is 'the propitiation for ours: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.' Lord willing, next week we will examine the frequent phrase in John, 'the whole world,' and discuss it in the context of limited atonement.

The idea is that Christ's blood covers us. It has satisfied God's anger because we violated His Holy Law. As the Mercy Seat covered the Ark of the Covenant, our Savior's blood covers the Christian. He has made satisfaction for our sins. This should teach us the seriousness of sin.

We live in a world that has been taking sin way too seriously lately. How contrary to Scripture! God despises it so much that Jesus had to satisfy God's wrath on our behalf.

Hebrews 2:17 states: 'Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.' First John 4:10 reveals the motivating cause of propitiation: 'In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' The 'we,' 'us,' and 'our' in this passage refer to believers, God's elect.

So, substitution, Jesus standing in our place and taking the punishment we deserve; reconciliation, restoring fellowship with God and exchanging alienation for friendship; and now propitiation, satisfying or appeasing the rightful anger of God because of sin. All of this belongs to the Christian as part of the atoning work of our beloved Savior. We begin to see why understanding atonement is crucial when studying a topic like limited atonement. The work of our Savior benefits His people in many ways. It should inspire our hearts to love and praise.

We should also begin to understand why we believe the atonement was specifically and indeed for the Elect of God. These great benefits are blessings from the children of God. They are all in Christ and were purchased by the blood of Christ.

Redemption

That brings us to the fourth great need that the atonement fully meets and what it has accomplished. That need is redemption. Here, we refer to the Lord Jesus Christ, who, through his atoning work, bought salvation for his followers. In Scripture, the word means 'to buy out,' primarily referring to purchasing a slave with the intention of freeing him.

Galatians 4:4-5 declares, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.' The work of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of His people involved a purchase, and the cost was incredibly high. What was the purchase price? Our Lord Himself. Jesus was the ransom price! When we hear the word ransom, we usually think

of kidnappers setting a price for the release of what they have stolen. In redemption, Jesus Himself was the ransom price.

Mark 10:45 states: 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.' We will discuss the extent of the atonement, Lord willing, in part two of our study. However, redemption, with all it has achieved and the benefits it has brought to Christians, is perhaps one of the strongest arguments for the extent of the atonement applying to God's people rather than to every individual who has ever lived.

Redemption doesn't make someone redeemable. Instead, our great Savior has purchased and secured our redemption from the penalty of sin! I can't think of any other truth in God's Word that offers Christians such encouragement and assurance. Rejoice, Christian! God has completed everything necessary for you through the work of the cross by our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is a substitute, bearing the punishment we deserve. He has reconciled us to God and God to us! He has satisfied and appeased God's righteous wrath through propitiation. He has redeemed us and bought our eternal salvation with His own life. That is the great Savior we worship, if you are in Christ!

I want to conclude these thoughts with a poem by the well-known hymn writer Augustus Toplady. It helps summarize our study.

“From whence this fear and unbelief? Hast thou, O Father, put to grief Thy spotless Son for me? And will the righteous Judge of men condemn me for that debt of sin, which, Lord, was charged to thee? Complete atonement thou hast made, And to the utmost farthing paid Whate'er thy people owed; How then can wrath on me take place, If sheltered in thy righteousness, And sprinkled with thy blood?

If thou hast my discharge procured, And freely in my place endured The full wrath of God, Payment God cannot twice demand, First at my bleeding Surety's hand, And then again at mine. Turn, then, my soul, unto thy rest; The merits of thy great High Priest Speak peace and liberty; Trust in his efficacious blood, Nor fear thy banishment from God, Since Jesus died for thee.”

Part Two: The Extent of the Atonement

Abstract

This is the second part of a two-part study examining the doctrine of definite atonement within the framework of Reformed theology. Part Two focuses on the extent and effects of Christ's atoning work. Building upon Part One's examination of the nature of the atonement, including substitution, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption, this study argues that the term 'definite atonement' more accurately reflects the scriptural teaching than the term 'limited atonement,' since God is not limited and the gospel should be offered to all.

Part two of our study presents three categories of biblical evidence demonstrating that Christ died for a specific people whom the Father gave to Him: passages showing the Father giving a people to the Son, texts revealing definite transactions between Father and Son, and explicit statements that Jesus died for His people. The paper also addresses passages commonly used to support unlimited atonement, such as John 3:16, arguing that these texts teach the universal offer of the gospel rather than universal redemption. Finally, the study explores the practical effects of this doctrine, showing how definite atonement assures believers, magnifies God's wisdom and grace, and serves as a powerful motivation for evangelism and Christian service.

Introduction

The hymn 'Ah, holy Jesus' was written by Johann Heermann, a Lutheran Christian poet who lived in the early seventeenth century. This was around the same time that the Church Council at Dordt in the Netherlands published the five points of Calvinism in response to the Arminian Remonstrance. Heermann clearly understood from God's Word the subject we are studying, which is part of our series on the Doctrines of Grace, specifically Limited Atonement.

Earlier, we introduced this subject by focusing on the nature of atonement itself. We used the following definition: 'The atonement is the work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation.' It is a clear definition that emphasizes the outcome of our Savior's suffering and death. He earned our salvation. It was a perfect accomplishment. We then stated that the best way to understand Limited Atonement is to study the nature of atonement, in other words, what our Lord Jesus accomplished in His sufferings and death.

Our hymn writer summarizes key aspects of the atonement we discussed in our last class. Starting in verse three, 'Lo the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered,' the writer refers to substitution. We looked at Isaiah 53:4-6, where we read that He has borne our griefs, carried our sorrows, was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and that with his wounds we are healed. Of course, the great New Testament statement on substitutionary atonement is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21: 'For our sake, he made him be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' This is the wonderful, great exchange. He took our sin, and in exchange, we are counted as righteous in the sight of God.

We also see propitiation in this hymn. In the context of atonement, 'propitiation' means satisfaction or appeasement. In verse four, the hymn writer describes our Lord's 'death of anguish' and 'bitter passion.' Our Savior satisfied God's justice by taking upon himself the punishment we deserve and appeased the just wrath of a Holy God. Our Savior is our propitiation. First John 4:10 reveals the motivating cause of propitiation: 'In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.'

Scripture teaches that the atonement reconciles God to His people and His people to God. The apostle Paul rejoiced in this great truth in Romans 5:10-11: 'For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.'

Finally, to summarize part one of our study on the atonement, we also stated that we have redemption through the death of our Savior. The Lord Jesus Christ purchased salvation for his people through the atonement. In Scripture, the word redemption means to buy out, especially the purchase of a slave with a view to his freedom. Praise God, He has bought us out of the slave market of sin into union with Himself. Galatians 4:4-5 declares, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.'

Our response to the great blessings that come through God's love and grace should be adoration. The last verse of our hymn states, 'Therefore kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee, I

do adore thee.' We should adore our great Savior. In response to His love, we should adore Him and fully commit ourselves to living for Him. In the words of those who are now in heaven, as recorded in Revelation 5:12-13: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" That should be the cry of our hearts.

The Extent of the Atonement

We want to focus now on the word 'limited' in the phrase 'Limited Atonement.' I must say it is an unfortunate label. Indeed, God is not limited. Indeed, the gospel of salvation should be proclaimed to every nation and every person. There is no limit to who should hear the gospel. There should be no limit to our desire to see the gospel of our Savior spread to all people and all nations.

A much better term would be definite atonement. This means Jesus was a substitute for, redeemed, satisfied justice, and reconciled a definite number of people, namely, His elect, those the Father gave to the Son. We are not saying that is a small number. That number is so vast that no one could ever count them. Definite atonement also means that the death of our Savior has infinite merit and is sufficient to pay for the sins of all whom the Father has given to the Son. There is no limit to the sufficiency of the atonement.

Unless someone believes that everyone who has ever lived will go to heaven, everyone believes in some degree of limited atonement. One could ask, if Jesus died to pay the penalty for sin for every person who ever lived, why isn't everyone saved from their sins? If Jesus died for a person's sins, but they ultimately must pay again for those sins in eternal punishment, doesn't that also limit the atonement? So, truly, the term 'limited' is somewhat unfortunate.

Scripture Proofs

Let's turn our attention to specific Scripture passages that support this doctrine of definite atonement, specifically the extent of the atonement. We can look at many categories in Scripture that validate this great truth.

The Father Gives to the Son a People

The first category includes references indicating that during the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry, He was aware of a specific group of people whom the Father had given to Him. John 6:37-39 records, 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.'

There is perfect unity in the Godhead. The Father gives to the Son, the Son redeems those given to Him, and, of course, though not mentioned here, we know the Spirit draws by grace those the Father gives to the Son. John 17:6-9 further declares, 'I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.'

Later in this section of the Gospel, Jesus prays for His people who have not yet believed, as recorded in John 17:20: 'I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.' This ties directly to the doctrine of election we have studied, which holds that God, in His grace and His grace alone, determined to redeem a people for Himself from the bondage of sin. In the Gospel accounts, the Lord Jesus clearly expressed a specific knowledge of and concern for those whom the Father had given to Him.

Definite Transactions

The next type of Scripture references that teach definite atonement are what we can call definite transactions. By that, I mean specific transactions that occurred between the Father and the Son when Jesus died. These transactions have particular reference to those who would believe. Of course, this ties back to the biblical nature of the atonement, specifically redemption. In redemption, a purchase takes place, a transaction.

Ephesians 1:7-8 declares, 'In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom

and insight.' Who has redemption according to that passage? Who is we in that verse? Paul is writing to the saints in Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus, as verse one states. Personal pronouns are essential to understanding many passages in God's Word. You, we, they, us, and similar pronouns should be interpreted in the context of each passage. When they are not, many errors can result. This is especially true when discussing God's purpose or the extent of the atonement.

Galatians 1:3-5 is another example of a definite transaction between the Father and the Son: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.' Paul is writing to the churches of Galatia, as indicated in verse two.

One final passage, though we could mention many more, is Romans 5:8-11: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.' Once again, who is the letter written to? In chapter one of Romans, verses six and seven, Paul's introduction states, 'You who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints. So, we see over and over again in the apostolic teaching that God provided Christ, and the sacrificial death of Christ produced a definite result for a definite group of people.

Explicit Passages Stating Jesus Died for His People

In addition to these passages showing the Father giving a specific people to the Son, Scripture also explicitly states that Jesus died directly for His people. From the very outset of the Incarnation, when the Angel of the Lord revealed to Joseph in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as His wife and that the baby conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit, the angel told Joseph what the baby's name must be.

Matthew 1:21 records, 'She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' It was always intended that His coming would save His people

from their sins. This is very explicit. Remember Paul's counsel to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.' Who was obtained by the precious blood of our Savior? The church, His bride.

We also have the words of the Good Shepherd, our Savior, in John 10:11-15: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.'

It is hard to be any more explicit. Over and over, Scripture identifies those for whom Jesus laid down His life. It was for His sheep, the elect of God, the bride of Christ. This was a very definite work.

One final passage is Romans 8:31-34: 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.' Who is the 'us all' in verse thirty-two, for whom God did not spare his own Son? The next sentence tells us: 'Who shall bring a charge against God's elect!'

Scripture Passages Used to Support Unlimited Atonement

Let's briefly consider a passage or two that, at first glance, may support an unlimited atonement. John chapter three is a well-known portion of the Word of God. Understanding the passage's context is crucial. In verse fourteen, the Lord begins to discuss with Nicodemus the Son of Man's impending death.

John 3:14-18 declares, 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the

world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'

Many of our Christian friends claim that this passage affirms that Christ died for the sins of everyone who ever lived. However, the Apostle is not saying that. He says that God's love motivates him to give his Son and that He loves the world of sinners. The 'world' can have different meanings in John. Here, it simply means the vast humanity of mankind, including Jews and Gentiles from every language, tribe, and nation.

Jesus compares his being lifted up on the cross with the bronze serpent revealed in Numbers chapter twenty-one. In that account, the Israelites had sinned and rebelled against God, complaining about the food and water. In God's righteous anger and judgment, He sent poisonous snakes to bite and destroy His people. But God graciously provided a means of healing those bitten by the snakes. The means of deliverance for the people there was to look at the bronze snake. What would have happened if the Israelites did not look at the lifted-up snake on the pole? Death. The snake was only effective if you looked.

I want to make the point that this passage in John 3 does not teach either unlimited or limited atonement. It teaches us about God's great love and grace. Whoever you are in this world of fallen sinners must look to God's Son and His death on the cross if you ever hope to obtain salvation. If you do not believe in God's provision, you will be condemned, as verse 18 makes clear.

I think this passage teaches the gracious, universal offer of the gospel, not an unlimited atonement. All are welcome to look to the Savior. None are excluded from the offer. The word 'world' appears one hundred eighty-five times in the New Testament, one hundred five of which are by the Apostle John. It can have different meanings depending on the context. It can mean Jews and Gentiles, or sometimes just a large group of people, and several other meanings.

One example is when the Pharisees, in their disappointment, said, 'Look, the world has gone after Him,' as recorded in John 12:19. In that context, the world does not mean every person alive. It can also mean the general public, as in John 7:4, when Jesus' brothers said, 'For no

one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.'

The Effects of the Atonement

Having examined the biblical evidence for definite atonement, we now consider how this doctrine should shape our lives in practical ways. We have already stated in our opening hymn that our response should be adoration. God has accomplished and applied our redemption through the work of our blessed Savior. When our Lord Jesus cried, 'It is finished,' before His death, it was not to leave open the possibility that some would be saved. No, it was once and for all final that His people will be saved with 100% certainty.

My point is that this truth should be a great comfort to Christians, filling our hearts with assurance. Indeed, that is one reason this truth is so important. It's the revealed word of God and sound doctrine. Titus 2:1 commands, 'But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.' These truths are vital to growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

Another substantial effect is that it exalts God's grace and brings honor and glory to God, which, of course, is the purpose of our existence. Revelation 4:11 declares, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'

Another reason is that it magnifies God's wisdom. Romans 11:33-36 proclaims, 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.'

These verses conclude the longest Scripture teaching on the need for and the provision God has made for salvation. Paul marvels at God's wisdom and knowledge. Are we doing the same? Studies on the Doctrines of Grace should not puff us up with knowledge. They should cause our hearts to marvel at the wonders of God's wisdom and knowledge. Of course, they also magnify the love, grace, and mercy of God.

There are many more reasons why this great teaching of definite atonement is so important, but I will end by noting that this doctrine is a tremendous motivation and encouragement to Christians in many areas. It motivates evangelism. Some people wrongly say, 'If I believed that Christ died only for the elect, wouldn't that discourage evangelism?' Of course, the answer is no, no, a thousand times no.

Jesus has secured salvation. It is certain. What is uncertain for us is who will respond. Only God knows. But our business is to spread this great gospel to everyone. Salvation is of the Lord, and He will accomplish His purposes. Our role as believers in Christ is to share this great gospel boldly and lovingly.

Along with evangelism, this truth motivates us to Christian obedience and service. Serving the Lord should be our heart's desire because He first loved us. Listen to what the Apostle wrote to the Galatians in 2:20: 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'

Dear Christian reader, the love of Christ and what God accomplished through Jesus' work on the cross should motivate us to worship, obey, and love God and one another. As the Apostle to the Corinthian church wrote, 'The love of Christ constrains me.' May it constrain us as well.